

Joint Statement of
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And
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Before
Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Concerning
Wildfire Preparedness for the 2008 Wildland Fire Season

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INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on Wildland Fire Preparedness for the 2008 fire season. Since the Department of the Interior (DOI) and the Department of Agriculture (USDA) work closely together in fire management, the two Departments are providing a joint statement.

The Departments take seriously and perform professionally and honorably our roles as land stewards and managing wildland fire. The Administration makes the protection of communities, the environment, and firefighters a priority and included funding the full inflation-adjusted 10-year average for wildland fire suppression in fiscal year 2008.

Wildland firefighting activity has expanded and become more complex in recent years, contributing to increased expenditures by the Departments. As this Committee has pointed out, these costs have escalated dramatically: the inflation-adjusted 10-year average for wildland fire suppression of the two Departments, \$1.3 billion, is nearly three times the FY 2001 level of \$472 million.

The Departments have adopted substantive management reforms to mitigate this cost trend. The Departments and our partners have spent significant effort and resources over the past several years to coordinate capability, improve inter-governmental communication, and employ management controls to ensure effective response. At the same time we have increased attention to cost containment and these efforts are having an effect on suppression costs. For example, USDA saw a decrease of over \$100 million on suppression expenditures in 2007 compared with 2006 even though the size of wildfires and acres burned were greater. Likewise, Interior has instituted management controls in 2008 to better manage overall suppression expenditures. Together, the Departments are committed to continue progress enhancing fiscal accountability, adopting best management practices, and improving efficient program delivery.

THE 2007 FIRE SEASON

Fire activity in 2007 was above normal by many standards. Across all jurisdictions, wildland fires totaled more than 85,000 incidents burning over 9 million acres, including more than 16,000 wildfires that burned 5.7 million acres of Federal lands. Last spring's drought and high temperatures resulted in the burning of over 1.4 million acres in Florida and Georgia. The summer saw extreme fires in Utah, Nevada and Idaho with six of the year's largest fires occurring in these States.

Last year, the U.S. Forest Service spent nearly \$1.4 billion on all fire suppression while DOI spent approximately \$470 million on all fire suppression. We are pleased that even in the face of such a long and severe fire year we achieved effective initial attack and suppression success on all fires. We will strive to maintain that level of performance. Although the 2007 fire season had 13 fires over 100,000 acres, and 33 days in Preparedness Level 5 – the highest level of fire activity during which several geographic areas are experiencing simultaneous major incidents and events in highly populated areas in Northern and Southern California, less money was spent by the Forest Service on suppression than in 2006. Working with our state, tribal, and local government partners, fewer homes were destroyed – approximately 2,900 homes lost in 2007 compared with over 4,500 homes lost in 2003, the most recent year that California endured a prolonged, extreme fire event. In the face of increasing fire management challenges around the country and southern California wildfires last fall, the Departments demonstrated superior performance.

The dedicated focus on hazardous fuels treatments and other forest restoration actions are making a difference in the wildland urban interface and a commitment to cost containment strategies are producing results.

2008 WILDLAND FIRE SEASON OUTLOOK

Most of the eastern, central and northwestern U.S. is predicted to have a normal outlook for significant wildland fire potential in 2008. Above normal significant fire potential is expected across portions of southern California, the Southwest, Western Great Basin, Rocky Mountains, Alaska and Florida in June. For the June through September period, significant fire potential is forecast to persist or increase in portions of California, the Southwest, Western Great Basin, and Rocky Mountains. Significant fire potential will decrease across Florida, eastern New Mexico, western Texas, Alaska, and southeastern portions of the Rocky Mountain area. The primary factors influencing fire potential this outlook period are:

- The amount of precipitation many areas receive in the early summer periods is an important factor in the severity of the fire season. Even with a rather wet period during the latter half of May, most of the West has been drier than normal this spring.

- Drought conditions continue over portions of the West and Southeast. However, improvement is expected in the Southeast and to a lesser degree over Texas and New Mexico.
- Abundant fine fuels across portions of the Southwest, southern California deserts and Front Range of the Rockies may lead to an above normal fire season in these areas.
- Fire potential should begin to wane over the Southwest and Florida in July due to the onset of the Southwest monsoon and increasing humidity and showers in the Southeast. Late spring snows could result in reduced fire potential in the Northern Rockies.

The fire season has already produced incidents that are evidence of the potential of the 2008 fire season. As of May 31, 2008, over 29,000 fires have burned in excess of 1.5 million acres. About half of the incidents occurred in the southeast and they burned two-thirds of the acres. Large fires in Texas and Florida, which continue to experience long-term drought conditions, made up much of the spring acres burned.

WILDLAND FIRE PREPAREDNESS

To prepare for conditions anticipated in the 2008 fire season, the Departments are working to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our firefighting resources. Fire managers assign local, regional, and national firefighting personnel and equipment based on anticipated fire starts, actual fire occurrence, fire spread, and severity with the help of information from the National Interagency Fire Center Predictive Services group.

Firefighting Forces

For the 2008 fire season, we will have available firefighting forces – firefighters, equipment, and aircraft – comparable to those available in 2007. More than 18,000 firefighters will be available, including permanent and seasonal Federal and State employees, crews from Tribal and local governments, contract crews, and emergency/temporary hires. This figure includes levels consistent with 2007 of highly-trained firefighting crews, smokejumpers, Type 1 national interagency incident management teams (the most experienced and skilled teams) available for complex fires or incidents, and Type 2 incident management teams available for geographical or national incidents.

The Forest Service hosts four interagency National Incident Management Organization (NIMO) teams staffed for 2008. They will operate with four seven-member full-time Type I Incident Management Teams ready to respond to wildland fire incidents. Already this year we are utilizing these teams in an interagency fashion in North Carolina on the Evans Road fire. These teams will not only assist in wildland fire incidents this season but implement the NIMO Implementation Plan, which calls for improvements in wildland fire program management in the areas of training, fuels management, cost containment, and leadership development, among others.

The National Interagency Coordination Center, located at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, coordinates firefighting needs throughout the nation. In the event of multiple, simultaneous fires, resources are prioritized, allocated, and, if necessary, re-allocated by the National Multi-Agency Coordinating group, composed of representatives of major fire organizations headquartered at NIFC. Prioritization ensures firefighting forces are positioned where they are needed most. Fire managers dispatch and track personnel, equipment, aircraft, vehicles, and supplies and are all managed through an integrated national system. If conditions become extreme, assistance from the Department of Defense is available under standing agreements, as well as firefighting forces from Canada, Mexico, Australia, and New Zealand, using established agreements and protocols.

Recruitment, retention and training of our firefighters are an important focus of the Departments – one that is critical to our success. We are committed to the brave women and men across the country serving as wildland firefighters and wildland fire program managers. The two Departments are working with the Office of Personnel Management to achieve educational requirements for our professional fire managers, GS 401, within the time frame they have set. The Departments have a plan in place to outreach to employees affected by this policy and will make every effort possible to assist all affected employees who wish to meet these educational requirements. The Departments believe that the 400 series provides an advantage to its employees as a professional series that offers a broad range of natural resource leadership opportunities as opposed to a narrowly defined classification that may limit opportunities. Further, the positive education requirement allows for better integration fire management into the portfolio of skills necessary to achieve balanced knowledge of land and resource management.

The agencies are dedicated to active recruitment and retention of fire fighters as well. The Forest Service recently completed an analysis for California and found that the recruitment rate is greater than its attrition rate. In fact, the total number of permanent Fire and Aviation Management staff in the region nearly doubled between 1997 and 2007, from 1,257 to 2,290. An 82% increase indicates successful recruitment efforts, not the opposite. Also, on average, Forest Service hourly pay rates are actually greater than those for comparable State positions. We acknowledge some National Forests areas in California have retention challenges, but we believe these situations are manageable. The Forest Service is currently assessing options to address this situation carefully in California and will implement approaches that are appropriate for the region shortly after June 30, 2008. The agencies have begun to assess this issue nationally and expect progress on a strategy for ensuring a strong firefighting force into the future.

Aviation

The wildland firefighting agencies continue to employ a mix of fixed and rotor wing aircraft. Key components of the Forest Service 2008 aviation assets include approximately 20 civilian large air tankers on Federal contracts, along with up to 35 Type 1 heavy helicopters and 34 Type 2 medium helicopters on national exclusive-use contracts; 53 Type 3 helicopters on local or regional exclusive-use contracts, and 8 Modular Airborne Fire Fighting System units that will be available for deployment.

Additionally, there are nearly 300 call-when-needed Type 1, 2 and 3 helicopters available for fire management support as conditions and activity dictate. Likewise, Interior the lead contractor for Single Engine Air Tankers, will maintain a mix of aviation resources in 2008 similar to that used in 2007, including call-when-needed and exclusive-use SEATS along with two water scooper air tankers, 34 Type 3 helicopters, and 11 Type 2 helicopters, as well as a mix of other classes of aircraft.

WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

The wildland fire management program in the two Departments is strong and moving in a positive direction. We are committed to continued improvement to increase our effectiveness and maximize our efficiency. The agencies will continue to face challenges outside of our control such as the expansion of the wildland-urban interface, and climatic and ecological changes. These have made the protection of life, property and natural resources from wildland fire more complex, demanding and expensive. However, we have the ability to make managerial decisions before and during fire incidents, and are working assertively on risk-informed management, cost management and operational efficiencies, utilization of research and technology, and targeted program implementation in order to reduce these impacts. More specifically, these actions include:

- Continuing, under the guidance of the Wildland Fire Leadership Council, to strengthen and expand the implementation of adopted policy of risk-informed management with Appropriate Management Response as its guide;
- A focus on hazardous fuels treatments in wildland urban interface areas and in fire-adapted ecosystems that present the greatest opportunity for forest restoration and to reduce the risk of severe fires in the future;
- Accelerated development and deployment of decision tools such as the Wildland Fire Decision Support System (WFDSS) to support risk-informed incident management;
- Use of the Stratified Cost Index to inform resource deployment options;
- Continuing to work on enhanced response and efficiency that comes from national shared resources and aviation resource cost management;
- Execution of management controls - for the Forest Service, the establishment of the Inter-Deputy Group, the Chief Principle Representative, the Line Officer certification process for incident management, and the enhancement of fiscal monitoring and oversight;
- Developing an Interagency Aviation Strategy intended to provide a national strategy for the future procurement and management of aviation resources;
- After action reviews to apply lessons learned and best practices to policy and operations.

The Departments have the best wildland firefighting organization in the world and together with our state, local, and tribal government partners work to maintain our operational excellence and continually improve the fire management program.

ADDRESSING WILDLAND FIRE RISK TO COMMUNITIES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

This Administration made the restoration of healthy forests and grassland an environmental priority and has made great strides in accomplishing that goal. The Administration has focused its effort and dedicated its budget resources to improve hazardous fuels reduction on the nation's landscape. The Departments have aggressively treated hazardous fuels to help reduce the risk of catastrophic fire to forests, and rangelands. In this effort, we put the National Fire Plan (NFP), the Healthy Forests Initiative (HFI), and the Healthy Forest Restoration Act tools to work, as well as other land management activities to keep progress going. However, dangerous fuels conditions still exist in many areas in the United States and the Departments will continue their emphasis on reducing hazardous fuels on priority lands. The FY 2009 President's Budget provides \$500 million in funding for hazardous fuels reduction, a level that is more than four times greater than in 2000, and over \$927 million to the implementation of the President's Healthy Forest Initiative.

The Administration has been and remains committed to restoring healthy conditions to our forests and rangelands, and protecting communities from wildfire. The effectiveness of these treatments in reducing wildfire severity and protecting property has been demonstrated time and time again. Several fires from last season, the Angora Fire in South Lake Tahoe, fires around the San Bernardino National Forest, and the complex fires in Florida and in Georgia around the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge illustrate this well. Specific accomplishments in this area are:

- From 2001 through the end of May 2008 the Forest Service and Department of the Interior land management agencies have treated over 26 million acres, an area larger than the State of Ohio, for fuels reduction on Federal lands, including about 21 million acres treated through hazardous fuels reduction programs and over 5 million acres of landscape restoration accomplished through other land management activities.
- In 2007, despite a substantial national wildfire suppression workload, the Forest Service and DOI reduced fuels and improved ecosystem health on more than 4.7 million acres of land nationally, of which over 3 million acres were treated through hazardous fuels reduction programs and 1.7 million acres of land restoration accomplished through other land management activities. Of the total, 2.5 million acres of treatments were performed in the WUI. As of the end of May we have together already accomplished over 1.5 million acres of hazardous fuels reduction and landscape restoration treatments in FY 2008.
- U.S. Forest Service and DOI, in cooperation with our non-Federal partners, continue to increase the community protection emphasis of the hazardous fuels program. Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs) assist localities to reduce risk and set priorities. Over 1,500 CWPPs covering more than 4,700 communities have been completed nationally.

- Collaborative Stewardship Contracting has expanded. These contracts facilitate projects that shift the focus of Federal forests and rangeland management towards a desired future resource condition of healthier forests and a means for agencies to contribute to the development of sustainable rural communities by adding local income and employment. To date, 428 Stewardship Contracts and agreements to work across almost 224,000 acres have been completed.
- In 2007, to more adequately demonstrate the benefits of fuels reduction treatments on fire risk, the Departments continued to measure changes in the Condition Class of Federal lands and we are currently working on metrics for forest health changes that will help demonstrate the outcomes of projects that remove fuels.
- Since the advent of the National Fire Plan in 2000, federal and non-governmental entities have collaborated operationally and strategically to improve fire prevention and suppression, reduce hazardous fuels, restore fire-adapted ecosystems, and promote community assistance. The 10-year Implementation Plan, with its performance measures and implementation tasks will guide the agencies to build on this success with our partners.

CONCLUSION

This concludes our statement, we would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.